DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 218 CS 212 849

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TITLE "Bad English" and "Slang": Students' Perceptions of Dialect in Writing.
PUB DATE 22 Mar 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Case Studies; Ethnography; Higher Education; Language Research; *Language Usage; Metacognition; Metalinguistics; Student Attitudes; Student Writing Models; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *African Americans; Ohio State University; Slang; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A case study explored two African Americans' perceptions of Black English (BE) in their writing of academic prose and the effect these perceptions may have on their own metalinguistic awareness. Subjects, two African American male undergraduates enrolled at Ohio State University who had difficulty with grammar or used BE in their writings, were observed during tutoring sessions in a writing center and were interviewed. Results indicated that: (1) the first subject recognized that certain concepts are more appropriate for talking BE than others, but that he does not appear to have an equal recognition of the appropriateness of BE features in writing; and (2) the second subject used very few BE grammatical features in his writing and demonstrated his unfamiliarity with the personal experience essay. Findings suggest that it is important that teachers and students become well-informed about the nature of language and its use. (Two excerpts from the field notes are included; two excerpts from the subjects' essays are attached.) (RS)

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1991 CCCC
Annual Convention
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"Bad English" and "Slang": Students' Perceptions of Dialect in Writing

The subject of my talk is students' perceptions of their use of nonstandard dialect in academic writing. I became interested in this subject when some of the students I tutored in our Writing Center gave intriguing answers to questions I raised about what appeared to be features of nonstandard dialect in their writing. Most of the students were unable to recognize their use of nonstandard dialect features; they considered that such features were simply "errors" or "bad English." One student even said that she used these features in her speech only when she was being "lazy." Others called this way of speaking "talking slang." Based on these responses, I hypothesized that students' misperceptions of the use of nonstandard dialect features might inhibit their metalinguistic awareness, which, according to Yaden and Templeton (1986), is a crucial part of becoming literate.

Over the past two quarters, I have explored this hypothesis as part of a pilot study of my dissertation on the rhetoric of Black English Vernacular (BEV). To avoid confusion in other portions of this paper, I will here use the term "Black English" to refer to vernacular varities of the English language spoken by many African Americans. I am aware, however, that, according to Labov (1972) this term is best used to refer to the whole range of language forms used by African Americans and that African American scholars have

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since replaced the term "Black English" with "Ebonics," a fusion of the terms ebony and phonics.

Most of what we know about non-standard dialect speakers' perceptions of their use of dialect derives from language attitude studies. Based on evaluations of speech samples and questionnaires about BE and Standard English (SE) researchers (Taylor 1975; Mays 1977; and Linn and Pike 1982) have indicated that BE speakers do not currently regard their dialect negatively. Although BE speakers may not currently view their dialect negatively, the terms many of them use to define it suggests a less than positive perception. A survey published in a volume covering the Proceedings of the National Invitational Symposium on the King decision indicates that most respondents define Black English as "slang." Five hundred respondents (250 high school and 250 community college students) took part in the survey, and forty percent of each group of students viewed Black English as "slang."

Since no indication was given in the report about whether the respondents were themselves BE speakers, these precentages are rather suspect. Still, such perceptions of BE tend to relegate the dialect to some inferior or dysfunctional language category. Indeed, according to Smitherman, "the concept of 'slang' does not begin to cover the broad range of semantic referents in the Black English vocabulary," not to mention, I would add, the phonological and grammatical rules of BE (43).

More interesting, perhaps, are the views that some BE speakers hold towards SE and African Americans who use SE as their main mode of communication. Not only is SE considered correct or proper English (see Taylor 1975), but those who speak it are thought to be "acting white." As recent as last year, for instance, USA today reported that an anthropologist

discovered that among African American high school students in Washington D.C. successful students were viewed as those who "acted white" for doing such things as getting good grades or speaking standard English. To be successful in school for these students, the anthropologist concludes, means that they risk not fitting into either the black or the white communities.

These perceptions seem to suggest that some BE speakers sense a loss of African American cultural identity through acquisition of standard English in school. Garner and Rubin (1986), however, investigated whether some BE speakers possess the type of motivation that leads them to become bidialectal while still retaining a sense of African American cultural identity (35). Through in-depth interviews with middle class African American professionals about their perceptions of the nature of SE and BE, they found that SE was viewed as culturally neutral and BE as being of "high linguistic vitality." Yet, while these professionals highly regarded BE, they held in low esteem "anyone who did not know when to use 'slang', 'image,' and 'street vernacular' for effect rather than as the major form of communication" (46).

Studies like Garner and Rubin's greatly contribute to our understanding of speakers' perceptions of the dialect they speak; nonetheless, they fail to account for speakers' perceptions of dialect in writing. That is, language attitude studies often fail to assess the impact of dialect use on literacy or how literacy effects dialect use. Whiteman's (1981) work with working class black and white students suggests that nonstandard dialects exert some degree of "influence" on written standard English, and Taylor's (1989) recent work goes even further by claiming that nonstandard dialects (i.e. BE), "interfere" with writing in SE. But none of the studies on dialect interference or influence take into account writers' perceptions of dialect. Nor do they employ ethographic techniques like participant observation and

ethnographic interviews which might allow for the discovery of writers' perceptions and uses of dialect.

In this paper, I explore two students' perceptions of BE in their writing of academic prose and the effect these perceptions may have on their metalinguistic awareness. By metalinguistic awareness, I mean the students' conscious awareness of the grammatical content of their writing and their ability to use language to talk about this content.

METHOD

Informants

The informants were two African American male undergraduates enrolled at Ohio State University. They were selected from among several students I have tutored over the past year in the university's Writing Center and basic writing program. These two students were chosen because their instructors reported that they had difficulty with grammar or showed evidence of the use of Black English in their writing. The first informant, whom I've named Clifford, was a 26 year old senior then enrolled in an intermediate level writing course; the other, whom I've named Donny, was a 23 year old freshman enrolled in our freshman composition course.

Participant Observation

Since much of the time I spent with informants occurred during informal meetings and/or tutoring sessions, I took fieldnotes on my participation in these gatherings and on what I observed. For this particular study, fieldnotes were used to record informants' general speech patterns and how they viewed the ways in which they spoke. I made what Spradley (1980)

calls expanded notes shortly after each session with the informants. Merged with these observations were brief introspective records of the fieldwork, which allowed me to take into account personal biases and feelings that influenced my research (72).

Ethnographic Interviews

Often during the course of participant observation, I also conducted informal ethnographic interviews with the informants to determine their perception of their use of dialect in writing. Grammatical and discourse level "errors" that the students' instructors classified as features of BE were pointed out to the informants to elicit their responses. Their responses and questions arising from them were audio-tape recorded. A formal interview was conducted with Clifford at a local residence. Since the interview with Donny occurred during a tutoring session with me at a tutoring facility on campus, his interview was less formal; it was more an integral part of the tutoring situation than a separate "interview" session. His responses to interview questions I, thus, included as part of my fieldnotes on the tutoring session.

Analysis

Tape-recordings of the interviews were transcribed, excluding lengthy digressions, hesitation phenomenon, and false starts. Interview data were analyzed for what they might reveal about how the informants perceived their use of dialect in writing. Selected data gathered from fieldnotes were analyzed to reveal informants' perceptions of (spoken) BE and SE. To distinguish between grammatical mistakes and features of BE in the

informants' writing samples, I used Whiteman's (1981) list of nonstandard dialect features.

EXCERPTS 1 AND 2 INSERT HERE

Conclusion

From my reading of these excerpts, you may have in mind certain conclusions that can be drawn. Recall that the first informant, Clifford, used some BE grammatical features in his essay but did not recognize them as such when asked to identify them. Nonetheless, he agreed with his instructor's comment that he wrote the way he talked. Still more confusing is the informant's perception of BE as slang and his claim that he only speaks it in rare instances (e. g., during telephone conversations). Apparently, the informant recongnizes that certain contexts are more appropriate for talking in BE than others, but he doesn't appear to have an equal recognition of the appropriateness of BE features in writing.

Although the second informant, Donny, used very few BE grammatical features in his essays, he believed that one of the major problems with his writing was that he used words like "I wanna be" and "ain't." And, like Clifford, he too agreed with his instructor's opinion of his writing, only it wasn't that he wrote the way he talked but that he failed to use "standard grammar" and lacked "coherence." The excerpt from his essay does reveal errors in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, but more than that, it reveals his "African American consciouness" style and his unfamiliarity with our personal experience essay.

With regard to Donny's general perception of BE, one finds a more enlightened, but still, disturbing view. Although he views what he calls

Excerpt 1 from Fieldnotes on Clifford

To give you both a sense of what I learned about my informants' perceptions of dialect and how, using ethnographic techniques, I did so, at this point, I wish to read an excerpt from my fieldnotes on a participant observation session with the first informant, Clifford.

From talking with Clifford over the telephone and listening to his voice recorded on his answering machine, his intonation patterns and rhythms seemed to me characteristic of some of the African American boys I grew up with. I thought it rather intriguing, then, that Clifford said that he didn't think that he spoke what I called Black English (BE). Although, when I was discussing with him my dissertation topic, he came up with the word "signifying" to identify some of the verbal games I hoped to document among students, he could only think of the term "slang" to define BE. I explained that BE was not slang and that it was governed by some rules of grammar different from standard English, but still he denied his knowing how to speak it. Then, I tried giving Clifford a few examples of BE like "I ain't got no. . ." (double negative) and "He be drinking on Friday" (invariant "be"). After a little time, the more we began to talk about it, Clifford said that at certain times, especially when he's on the phone, he might "let loose," meaning that he might speak in the manner which I described.

Several weeks later, in a formal interview session with the student, the following information was excerpted from the audio-tape transcriptions.

I pointed to two places in Clifford's expository essay on the Black church (see appendix 1) that showed the omission of the third person possessive (s), consonant cluster (ed), and (s) suffix in third person singular present tense verbs--BE features noted by Whiteman (1981) as having the most common influence on the writing of nonstandard dialect speakers. I asked Clifford to tell me if he had noticed the omissions and why the above features were omitted.

- Initially, instead of answering my questions about the omissions, he expressed concern about his incorrect comma usage and what he called "sentence structure," that is, problems with run-on sentences.

- Then he said that the omissions were "mistakes" caused by his having to rush to complete the paper.

- Finally, he mentioned that his instructor said that he writes like he talks; at this point, I asked him to read the instructor's comment (see

appendix1) about his language use written on the last page of his paper and tell me what he thought of it. After reading it, he says "I think that's true. . . . You know, when you talk. . ., you know what I'm saying, you talking for so long. There's a proper way of talking. When you write I guess you write the way you talk and the way you feel. It's your sound. That's the way it comes out. But evidently it's wrong. I should go back and be able to pick it out and change it during the editing process."

Excerpt 2 from Fieldnotes on Donny

Before I discuss the language perceptions expressed in the previous excerpt, I'd like to read you another excerpt from my fieldnotes on a tutoring/interview session I had with the second informant, Donny.

Donny was working on a descriptive essay that would compare how he became literate to how Maya Angelou and Malcolm X acquired literacy. Yet, he said that his "style of description" was different from theirs; it was, he said, "African American consciousness"--a consciousness that the African American has been "put down" by white society. About twenty minutes into the tutoring/interview session, I asked Donny if he could tell me about his writing in his English course last summer. I wanted to know what writing concerns brought him to the Writing Center. Donny said that his instructor told him that he had problems with "coherence and grammatical." I then asked him what kind of grammatical problems he was told he had. He said problems like "I wanna be" or "ain't." In response, I told him that he never used words like that in his writing and to prove it I read to him the first draft of his personal experience essay (see appendix #2 for excerpts).

Donny looked through the draft, but couldn't find examples of what he meant by coherence or grammatical [mistakes]. He then commented that maybe because the instructor said it he thought that his problem was grammatical. I asked him what he called "I wanna be" and "ain't, and he responded that they were "chopped up phrases Black Americans use in their English." He went on to say that "Most caucasians connect themselves with Standard English. I believe that the chopped up phrases that Black Americans use is their English." Donny had never heard of the linguistic terms Black English or Black English Vernacular, but he referred to the English Black Americans use as "African American English." When I asked him what he thought of writers like Langston Hughes use of BE in poetry, he said that he had noticed what he called that "style" of writing and thought that it should, and I quote verbatim, "be valued, and that it should be used, and accepted by society because it shows the diversity of American English, Standard American English. It's just like a Chinese person or person from a foreign country coming over here. They might use chopped up phrases, but it still gets the meaning across. I don't think that one should always have to use the 'ing' suffix on everything they say. An example, a black American might say 'I'm comin' whereas a caucasian American might say I'm coming. I don't think that there is enough difference in those two that it should be disregarded as well the black American can't speak standard American English. I think as long as the point is brought forth, that it should be accepted."

"African American English" as an acceptable form of the English language spoken by many African Americans, and believes that it should be valued, he refers to it as "chopped up phrases" likened to the spoken English of the foreigner. Although historical accounts (see, e. g., Smitherman 1977) indicate that BE probably derived from the pidginization and creolization of African languages, the English spoken by BE speakers cannot be defined in the same way as the English of a foreigner or second language learner.

I raise all of these contradictions not to quibble over fine linguistic definitions and distinctions. I merely want to point out how important it is that students and teachers are well-informed about the nature of language and its use. Admittedly, it is not clear from this research that students' perceptions of their use of dialect in writing effects their ability to write compositions in standard academic English. Too many variables problematize this research to make such a claim. However, students' misperceptions (or, more likely, their teachers' since students seem to get many of their linguistic perceptions from their teachers) of their uses of dialect do seem to effect their meta-linguistic awareness. It effects, in Sternglass's (1975) terms, the awareness of dialect for particular writing circumstances and the recognition of social and regional dialect forms that could add to students' experiences a positive instead of negative dimension in the consideration of levels of usage (204). But the real test to my hypothesis and the challenge to future research is to make students like Clifford and Donny more aware of the language forms they have in their repetoire, to add new forms to this repetoire, and then, over time, to see how this awareness changes the way they write academic prose.

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Appendix I

Excerpt from Clifford's final draft of his essay on the Black church (untitled)

Midway through the third paragraph Clifford writes as follows (This paragraph was reproduced as it originally appeared in the essay):

. . . . The church is the only place where blacks can gather together in order to worship and draw strength form one another. Also, three has never been a line drawn between the community and the church. The community directly affects the church through the local congregation and the church provides services based on the community needs. More importantly, the church is the only institution that blacks clearly control. It is financially independent. This combine with the location of the church allows the church to be more receptive to the community needs.

However more importantly than the potential political and social activism that exist in the church, the spreading of the gospel is still the most powerful weapon that can be used to uplift, correct and change people's lives.

The Instructor's comments on Clifford's use of grammar in the essay:

I think it would help you a lot if you examined the pattern of grammatical problems present here. The verb tenses, prepositions, plurals, and possessives that misfire here are standard examples of what we in the trade call "Black English Vernacular" (or BEV), the spoken language of the Black community. Learning what they are will help you locate their incidence in future work so that you can translate them into "Standard Written English" (different "dialect") during the editing process

Appendix II

Excerpt from Donny's draft of the personal experience essay, entitled "While Living in California I Met Huey P. Newton."

Donny writes the following in paragraphs two and three (The paragraphs were reproduced in their original form):

The meeting was held at the East Oakland Community Center, it was a Very hot Day. Huey P. Newton Arrived around 7:30 and greeted Everyone; Hello Brothers and Sisters Today is a Day of Outrage how long will we allow the Oppressor to Murder and Terrorize are Black Leaders and Black Youth. When our People learn that it is no longer advantageous for them to resist by going to the streets in large numbers and when they see the advantage in the activities of Guerrilla Warefare Methods, they will quickly follow this example. When the Vangaurd Group destroys the machinery of the oppressor by dealing with him in small groups of three and four and then escapes the might of the oppressor, the masses will be overjoyed and will adhere to this correct strategy

After meeting with Huey P. Newton and Listening to him Speak I became aware of my Existance as A African American, and the Importance of aCollege Education. As a African American My Presence in America, is sometimes regarded as obsure by many as a Attack on Values and Principles that they regard as the Black Man's place in Soceity. Many people in America consider a African American's Place in soceity as a person who is lazy and does nothing but steal and does Drugs. and the African American Woman as a person who wants to benifit from the Welfare System in America. After I became aware of this misinterepreted view of my People I began to Chanllege this myth by using my Talents and Awareness of the African American Culture to Educate myself and other African Americans to become aware of there exsistance in America and to put an end to this Stereotype.